

# Implementing Parental Involvement in Infants' Rooms: Explore Infant Teachers' Perspectives and Practices

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## Abstract

Researchers had theorized that the earliest years' experiences were extremely critical to a child's future development (Jung, 2008; Liu et al., 2020), and parental involvement was a key character (Lamb et al., 2002; Liu, 2020). Though the critical role of parental involvement in education has been confirmed, less attention has been paid to its influence on infants' development. For the sake of infants' appropriate development, infant teachers always met barriers to finding, designing, and implementing age-appropriate activities. This case study aims at exploring the role of parental involvement in the development in infancy by surveying one director, four infant teachers, and six early childhood pre-service teachers' perspectives and practices regarding parental involvement in infant rooms within a Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center. Findings revealed that all participants: (1) thought parental involvement was essential to their decision-making process; (2) were aware of the benefits of implementing parental involvement in infants' rooms; (3) gained an opportunity to reflect on their practices regarding parental involvement and reprocess their previous perspectives. This study recommends that, in order to facilitate infants' development appropriately, child-care centers need to take into account parental involvement and work with parents collaboratively.

## Keywords:

*Case study, Survey, Parental Involvement, Infants' development*

## 1. Introduction

According to previous literature, parents are much more familiar with their baby since the first smiles, gurgles, cries, and baby talks so that parents would have a better understanding of their baby's verbal or non-verbal cues. In 2002, Lamb, Bornstein and Teti had theorized that parents contribute directly and indirectly to the development of their child not only by passing their genes but also by their behaviors and daily interactions when they spend time with their child. In addition to the important role of parents in infancy, Brazelton and Cramer (2018) emphasized the relationship between parents and infants in early years is critical to infants' later development. Thus, the significant role of parents could hardly be replaced or ignored in one child's early years' experiences (Epstein, 2018; Wan et al., 2012), especially in infants' development (Feeney et al., 2016; Hedenbro & Rydelius, 2019; Lamb et al., 2002;

Lang et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2020; Martin & Berke, 2007; Stern, 2019; Thiele et al., 2016). Infancy period has been considered as a unique and critical period by an increasing number of early childhood professionals due to infants' limited abilities (Feeney et al., 2016; Jung, 2008; Lamb et al., 2002; Liu et al., 2020; Piaget, 1962). However, the Reggio Emilia approach (REA) noted that infants could be capable of many skills which is in line with Gandini and Edwards (2001) that infants could use 100 different languages to express themselves, such as smiles, cries, body languages (Lamb et al., 2002).

So far, plenty of researchers have indicated that parental involvement plays a crucial role in young children's education (Brazelton & Cramer, 2018; Hedenbro & Rydelius, 2019; Jung et al., 2019; Liu, 2020), and more and more evidence directly indicated that parental involvement helped children to engage more, achieve higher, facilitate reading interests, and perform better in schools, such as children hold a positive attitude towards going to school and learning (Carroll, 2013; Epstein, 2018; Liu, 2020; Milly, 2010; Reynolds, 2005). However, infant teachers comes with many challenging moments such as "language misunderstandings, behavior misunderstandings, or special needs". Also, many early childhood teachers lack of skills or experiences in caring and facilitating infants' growth by cooperating parents. Thus, very few considerations were paid to what kind of parental involvement in infants' development particularly (Liu, 2020; Liu et al., 2020).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Role of Parents in Infancy

Infancy is a period which was defined from 0 to 2-year-old based on Lamb, Bornstein and Teti's (2002) theory, and it has been considered as a critical period because the earliest years' experiences have a profound and long-term influence on their future development (Feeney et al., 2016; Hedenbro & Rydelius, 2019; Jung et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2002; Liu, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Martin & Berke, 2007). Parenting was believed to be one of the most significant characters in this particular period throughout one child's whole life span (Brazelton &

Cramer, 2018; Lamb et al., 2002; Liu, 2020; Wan et al., 2012). Traditionally, within early childhood education, infants always needed extra support from adults, such as parents and other adult caregivers. In addition to this image of infants, most people have long thought that infants were “incapable learners” because children cannot talk, walk, write, and solve problems by themselves in this unique moment. By holding this notion of infancy, infant teachers in a child development center setting would like to focus more on their beliefs of what infants needed and should learn rather than what infants liked and wanted to know. The curriculum for infants was often teacher-driven rather than child-centered which was not recommended as a good method for infants to develop (Gandini & Edwards, 2001). Thus, to better facilitate infants’ growth, it was essential to figure out “what”, “why”, and “how” to help infants grow.

As early as 2004, Bogenschneider, Gross, and Johnson had theorized that students’ achievement is shaped by their life outside the school which was in line with Dewey’s (1897) perspectives on true education that the link between family and school is far more important. Moreover, Martin and Berke (2007) also emphasized the vital role of family life in a child’s early development and suggested early childhood educators should see families as partners. Parents’ words, behaviors, social interactions, and beliefs can have a profound influence on their child’s development in infancy directly and indirectly (Lamb et al., 2002).

Parents have always been perceived as infants’ first teacher, and they continue to play an influential role in one child’s life (Feeney et al., 2016; Hedenbro & Rydelius, 2018; Lamb et al., 2002; Liu, 2020). Also, it is generally believed that infants spend most of their time with their parents since they were born. In 2018, a research conducted by Hedenbro and Rydelius utilized a pilot study to examine the long-term influence of parents in infancy on their children’s social competence. Results in this research noted that children’s later social competence is associated with their communication abilities with both parents in infancy (Hedenbro & Rydelius, 2018). In addition to the important role of parents in infancy, the result in a most recent study conducted by Jung et al., (2019) indicated that the role of parents in infants’ early reading experience would influence their future academic achievement profoundly. Evidence in this study found that there exists the direct relationship between early years’ reading experiences and children’s later reading

motivation, reading ability, and academic achievement. Thus, it is reasonable to consider that the role of parents is significant in infants’ development and their future achievements (Hedenbro & Rydelius, 2018; Jung et al., 2019).

## 2.2 The Significance of Parental Involvement in Infancy

By reviewing previous researchers regarding the important role of parents in infancy, parents are the most essential part of infants’ development because they did not only provide their infants’ basic needs but also support them in life. Since child development centers have been increasingly considered as a primary setting for infants’ development, the role of infant teachers and their perspectives regarding parental involvement becomes more and more important (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018) as well as the connections between teachers and parents (Lang et al., 2016; Lang et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that infant teachers could gain access to know infants better by communicating with parents of infants (Lang et al., 2016; Liu, 2020), and encouraging them to engage in various activities or events within the classroom (Maras et al., 2018).

A study conducted by Lang et al., (2016) explored the connections between home and childcare center for very young children by qualitative interviewing. Evidence in this study illustrated that the positive interactions between parents and teachers would benefit for young children and recommended to build the strong parent-teacher relationship. Later in 2017, Lang, Schoppe-Sullivan and Joen utilized the questionnaire to explore the influence of parent-teacher relationship on young children’s achievement. Results in this study indicated that parental involvement plays a critical role in their child’s academic and social success and recommended that it is essential to build good relationships between parents and teachers. It is believed that involving parents would benefit all stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, especially for infants (Lang et al., 2016; Liu, 2020; Maras et al., 2018).

Despite the recognized influential factor in infants’ development, and the advantages of parental involvement, early childhood educators who are working with infants are still facing challenges. Thus, the present study aims at understanding infant teachers’ perspectives and experiences regarding parental involvement in infants’ development, and how it influenced their work with infants, and ultimately, infant teachers or people who work with infants might improve their skills to better facilitate

infants' growth by being aware of the importance of parental involvement and the benefits of implementing parental involvement.

The following questions were explored in this study:

- (1) How do infant teachers view parental involvement in the development in infancy?
- (2) How does the parental involvement influence their curriculum decision-making process?

### 3. Method and Data Sources

The present study chose to use a qualitative research approach to explore infant teachers and early childhood pre-service teachers' perspectives and practices about parental involvement in a Reggio Emilia-inspired child development setting in America. It was framed in a case study and utilized a survey questionnaire method to collect data. The survey questions were designed by the researcher and reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Ohio University. The questions in the survey for early childhood educators who are working with infants regarding their perspectives and practices on parental involvement in the selected setting. To ensure the validity of this study, 7 professional researchers were invited to review and provide feedback. One of them was the expert in early childhood education, two of them were professors who were experts in research methodology, and four of them were my friends and colleagues in different department. All of them provided critical feedback and made comments on survey questions, and I revised it based on their opinions.

#### 3.1 Settings and Participants

The setting was chosen by "purposeful sampling" (Elfenbein & Schwarze, 2020; Patton, 1990; Rasti Borujeni et al., 2020). All participants were recruited from a University-based child development center and they are working with infants during this period. Firstly, I scheduled a meeting with one director, four infant teachers, and six early childhood pre-service teachers from two infant rooms in a Reggio Emilia-inspired child development center in America. During this meeting, I introduced my research topic and explained the goal of this study to them. Secondly, I sent out the consent forms to them and asked them if they had any questions or concerns before they decided whether to participate in this study. However, they all showed that they were interested in this research topic and decided to contribute to this study. All of them signed the consent form and agreed to participate in this study. I collected the consent form with their signatures. After this, I gave them a sheet with the survey questions (See Appendix A). The survey questions were divided into sets of close-ended and open-ended

questions. Since the survey questions were designed for all potential participants, I put "infant/toddler" together in case participants may have different definitions of the "infancy" period. I chose to define it as ages from 0 to 2 years old (Lamb et al., 2002).

As a result, 10 participants were from two infant rooms and 1 participant was the director of the center. They all have experience working with infants. We designed "Table 1" to present the demographic information of all participants. After they finished the survey, I collected all sheets from them and sealed them in a document folder. I opened this folder only if I got home and wanted to start to analyze the data. In the following section, the process of data analysis was presented.

**Table 1**

#### *Demographic Information of Participants*

Participant	Occupation	Participant's Education Level	Age range of children in their classroom	Gender	Classroom size
Mary	Director	Master		Female	
Shannon	Infant teacher	Bachelor	0-2	Female	10
Anna	Infant teacher	Bachelor	0-2	Female	10
Kate	Infant teacher	Bachelor	0-2	Female	10
Sara	Infant teacher	Bachelor	0-2	Female	10
Lily	Pre-service teacher	Bachelor	0-2	Female	10
Kelly	Pre-service teacher	Bachelor	0-2	Female	10
Dianna	Pre-service teacher	Bachelor	0-2	Female	10
Peter	Pre-service teacher	Bachelor	0-2	Male	10
William	Pre-service teacher	Bachelor	0-2	Male	10

#### 3.2 Data Analysis

Since the purpose of this study was to explore early childhood educators' perspectives and practices of parental involvement in infant rooms, utilizing a case study method was the best way to gain access to understanding their inner thoughts (Yin, 2017). I took the effort to avoid my subjective opinions during the interpretation process and chose to cross-check each description carefully.

Firstly, I organized all questions into different files and added all participants' answers to each file. Then, I read and re-read the answers from surveys. During this process, I took notes and made comments on valuable pieces of evidence based on the research questions of this study. I highlighted the important message with different theme colors. Recurrent themes from infant teachers' answers were coded and categorized into different themes. Findings were discussed and illustrated in detail in the next

section.

## 4. Findings

According to the findings, this study revealed that all participants were aware of the significant role of parental involvement in infants' development and believed that parental involvement was a useful tool in their teaching experiences because they all found that parents' information was essential to their work with infants and felt satisfied with what parents of infants shared with them.

### 4.1 The Significance of Parental Involvement in Infancy

Based on their answers to the close-ended questions, I designed a "Table 2" to show their answers to the close-ended questions from Q1 to Q2.

**Table 2 Participants' answers to close-ended questions**

Participant	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
Mary	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Shannon	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Anna	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
Kate	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Sara	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
Lily	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Kelly	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2
Dianna	1	1	2	1	2	2	1	2
Peter	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	2
William	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	2

(P: Participants; Q: question; 1: Strongly agree; 2: Agree; 3: Neutral; 4: Disagree; 5: Strongly Disagree)

According to their responses, all participants strongly agreed that parents are willing to be involved in school activities, always share information with them and the information they shared helped them to design lesson plans for infants. They all strongly agreed that parents know their child's needs and interests better and would like to consider parents' information as an essential part in their curriculum design process. Though all four pre-service teachers strongly agreed that parents' information were important, they did not get more chances to communicate with parents due to the time schedule in the infant room. The results implicitly indicated that all infant teachers were satisfied with parents' information in regard to infants' individual needs and always had regular communication with parents.

Regarding the significance of parental involvement in infancy, infant teachers all expressed their positive attitude regarding parental involvement, and they would like to

engage parents in all kinds of school events. When they were asked about whether they would like to encourage parents of infants to be involved in school events, infant teachers all shared their positive perspectives of parental involvement,

I will definitely try my best to involve parents. and engage them in my designed activities because I found that children were very active when they saw their parents in the school. And sometimes I could not understand their babies' behaviors, so it is better to discuss it with their parents and understand them well, and then, better help them to develop and grow. (Shannon)

Yes, I will. Because I think it is not only a good way for infants to build relationship with their parents but also a way for us to build relationship with parents. It gives opportunity for more casual conversations and get access to know children's family backgrounds. This allows them to see my personality and for me to see their personality. (Anna)

More specifically, Lily, a pre-service teacher who was assigned to the infant room to finish her internship, also found that parental involvement is useful and expected to gain more opportunities to communicate with parents. For Lily, engaging parents and communicating with parents was useful when she met challenges in the room. She responded,

I think I will (engage parents in the room). In our classroom, there were babies from other countries. I sometimes found it was difficult to understand these babies' needs and verbal cues. Whenever I had chance to talk with their parents, I would like to ask them about their child's special terms and tried to understand their needs. Their sharing was very useful to me. Sometimes I expected their parents to come to the school so that we can talk, discuss. I definitely want to engage parents in the classroom.

In addition to the important role of parental involvement, Mary, the director, also regarded, it important to help infant teachers gain access to understand infants well. She answered,

We always consider parents as an important partner. We found that parents and teachers communicated with each other whenever, wherever they meet each other, for example, pick up time, classroom activity, and some school events. I think their [parents] role is very important to infants because

sometimes teachers may not understand their cues.

As reflected in all their statements, it is rational to consider that all participants were aware of the significant role of parental involvement, especially in infants' development. Since these early childhood educators all considered infancy as a unique period in education and thought that parents would have a better understanding of their babies, they said that they would like to involve parents in school activities more often because they were aware of its influence on infants' development and they can know infants' individual needs better. More specifically, their sharing also emphasized the importance of parental involvement when they met cultural conflicts issues, such as different languages.

#### 4.2 The Benefits of Parental Involvement

The critical role of parental involvement had been presented in the last section. In addition to its significant influence on infants' development, this section conducted a discussion regarding the benefits of implementing parental involvement, elaborated on how it worked for teachers in the infant rooms, and revealed its benefits for infants' development. Three major themes were categorized: (1) ways for communication between parents and infant teachers/early childhood pre-service teachers; (2) advantages of building good communication between parents and infant teachers/ early childhood pre-service teachers; (3) benefits for infants' development.

##### 4.2.1 Ways for Communication between Parents and Infant Teachers/ Early Childhood Pre-service Teachers

According to their responses to the closed-ended questions, all participants strongly agreed that a good parent-school relationship offered them chances to understand infants well. This point was also supported by their answers regarding the open-ended questions. When they were asked to list any school events that they would like to encourage parents to be involved, they identified several popular events such as parent-teacher meetings, parent-teacher conferences, garden parties, winter parties, and pool parties. What's more, they shared some parental involvement experiences including informal daily communications, such as daily drop-off or pick-up time, and emails. An infant teacher, Kate answered,

Some parents would like to talk with us about their child at the "drop-off" or "pick-up" time. I think it is a good way for us to know this child better.

Sara, another infant teacher, also mentioned about emails and believed it is a convenient way to communicate with parents. She said,

Some parents used emails to communicate with me. about what happened and what they want to know

about their child. It's a good way because it can save both of us time, and whenever we want to talk, we can. It is also a way of parents' involvement.

Particularly, one pre-service teacher, Kelly shared her experiences in a parent-teacher conference, and wrote,

We had parent-teacher meetings often, and parents always shared their concerns and worries about their child. We also provided them answers and gave them the notes that we took for their child individually. So each parent would have a sheet with all their child's information. I think this is a good way for parents to know their children. And if they have concerns, they would also ask us about it during the meeting or after the meeting. Therefore, we can know what the parents' opinions as well.

In addition to the importance of parental involvement, Mary, the director of this center also shared,

We always tried to plan to have activities to engage parents in the center so that children would have time to be with their parents. We believe that this is also a good way to help parents know more about our daily works, such as what did they children do and how did their child learn in the center. Also, I think it is a good way for parents and teachers to communicate because most of the parents do not have much time due to their work schedules. So as we know the importance of parental involvement, we always encourage parents to join the activities that we designed for their kids. I think it can benefit parents, teachers, and eventually infants.

Based on the above statements, they all believed that having good communication with parents could provide chances for both infant teachers and parents to know their child's development well. and promoting communication between teachers and parents will benefit infants, teachers, and parents at the same time.

##### 4.2.2 Advantages of Building a Good Communication between Parents and Infant Teachers/ Early Childhood Pre-service Teachers

As reflected in the last topic, all participants noted that having a good communication could benefit parents, early childhood educators, and eventually infants. Their perspective was supported by the following evidence. When asked about how did parental school involvement help them build a relationship with parents, one infant teacher, Kate responded,

By having frequent communication, teachers can observe, and learn more about each family's

dynamic culture such as language among family gestures, routines, ideas, morals/values, care routines, types of play, and interests. I always tried to communicate with their parents and spend time with them to know more about their babies, so I can add more related family culture elements in my teaching.

In addition to the advantages of having good communication between parents and infant teachers, participants shared their perspectives of having good communication with students' parents,

Parental involvement in school helps build teacher and parent relationships because of the opportunities to socialize with families and share about everyday and/or milestone and memories about their children and families. (Kate)

It gives us a lot of opportunities to informally discuss their child's time at school, as well as get to know the parents on a personal level. This greatly helps build the relationship. (Anna)

When parents are involved at the school, we are able to get to know the parent better and help them to learn our practices within the school. (Sara)

Speaking to parents daily allows us to provide a stable and consistent routine for children and provide us with more detailed information about child that we could not know otherwise. (Shannon)

#### 4.2.3 Benefits for Infants' Development

Based on the answers to open-ended survey questions, all participants considered parental involvement as an important role to help them work with infants and improve their understandings of infants so that they can better facilitate infants' development. When asked about how did parental involvement help them work with infants, they responded,

Parents being involved with their children helps us to get to know their children and children's behaviors better. When children see teachers closely connected with their family. They will become more trusting, and more expressive of themselves because they will see school as a part of their life and not just part of their day. It helped us a lot. (Sara)

The more a parent is involved, the more we learn about their child and families. We learn about their

behaviors at home or words they may be saying at home and bring that into our work with the children. (Anna)

I found some babies who were not from America and they were extremely excited when they saw their parents in the school. They were more active, happier, and engaged more. I think it is really great to involve parents especially there are babies from other cultures. (Kelly)

Parents are the experts of their children and through their involvement, we as teachers can benefit from that wealth of knowledge. They are a valuable resource in learning about each child. From this we are better able to know how to work with each child. Through discussion and other means of involvement, we are able to create a reciprocal relationship that has everyone on the same page about doing what is best for the child. (Dianna)

The more a parent is involved the more we learn about their child and families. We learn about their behaviors at home or words they may be saying at home and bring that into our work with the children. (Kate)

As reflected in the above statements, all of them highlighted the importance of parental involvement in light of understanding infants better and perceived it as a key component in their teaching. They all viewed parents' contribution to their teaching as an essential factor which can facilitate the infants' development and promote parent-teacher relationship. For example, infant teachers can gain a better understanding of each child by communicating with parents so that they can provide better instructions and notice if there are special needs for each child.

#### 4.3 Recommendations for Practices

When they asked about their suggestions regarding implementing more active parental involvement in infant rooms, they shared commonly,

To encourage this further we could openly invite parents more frequently. It's also important for families to see school and home as a team working together. (Peter)

More advertisement for events/volunteer opportunities and encourage parents to be involved. (Kelly)

There might be more parent involvement in the classroom if we were to encourage parents to join our classroom more. (Dianna)

Based on the survey, all participants believed that their child development center did a very good job on implementing parental involvement and would like to encourage parents to be involved in the infant rooms more according to their critical reflections on their experiences and perspectives regarding their parental involvement experiences in infant rooms.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

All participants including infant teachers, early childhood pre-service teachers, and director of the center perceived parental involvement as an important component which is in line with Epstein's (2018) theory of parental involvement in children's development. All of them shared common views on the significance of parental involvement by expressing their positive feelings regarding implementing parental involvement in infant rooms. The findings indicated that infant teachers and early childhood pre-service teachers not only enhanced their understanding of infants but their level of confidence in communicating with parents of infants, implementing parental involvement, and instructional skills in teaching in infant rooms. The role of parental involvement in infancy was valued as an important component of infants' development. Their presence in events or activities can help infant teachers gain access to understand infants better. This finding is consistent with Lamb, Bornstein, and Teti (2002) that parents can have a better understanding of their babies' special needs. Thus, teachers would easily get access to know infants better by involving parents and communicating with parents.

All participants considered parental involvement as a vital role in infants' growth. All of them shared common views on the importance of parental involvement and believed it is an essential way to build a bridge for school and family which is in line with Epstein (2018)'s theory of the relationships between school and family.

The present study found that the positive relationship between parents and teachers would benefit infants' growth. This relationship laid groundwork where both parents and teachers exchanged information on common topics and gained access to have mutual understanding so that they can cooperate with and support each other in infants' growth. As reflected in all their statements, it is reasonable to believe that all participants were aware of the significance of parental involvement in their practice and infants' development. Moreover, they would like to make efforts to encourage parents to be involved in the infant room and school events more often. In sum, the

present study believes that the more parents are involved, the better development their infants could have. In addition, this study emphasized the importance of parental involvement in infants' development and highly recommended early childhood educators to implement parental involvement in their rooms.

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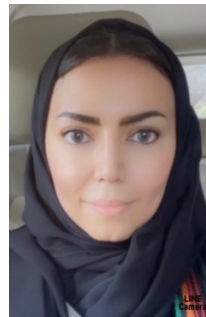
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